

We Had the Checklist, We Just Didn't Do the Checklist,

by Lt. Gregg Gray



I was on my first deployment as an H2P in the H-46D, flying SAR for the *Peleliu* ARG. This cruise gave me the chance to fly plenty of hours in support of Marine operations, as well as a few special-warfare exercises.

Our ARG left the Persian Gulf early to take position off East Timor as part of Operation Stabilize (an international peacekeeping effort). I was excited about getting to participate in a real-world operation, and the experience lived up to my expectations. I saw parts of the world I probably never would have seen, and the operations tempo was fun, fast-paced, and exciting. However, after a month on station and 65 straight days at sea, we all grew weary. The entire crew breathed a sigh of relief when we were finally released to continue eastward. Everybody eagerly anticipated four, well-deserved days of liberty in Hawaii.

During the week-and-a-half transit, the ship's decision to keep flight ops to the absolute minimum met no opposition. We needed all the down time we could get. I had taken full advantage of every "opportunity to excel" that came my way. I felt like a seasoned, well-trained H2P,

smart enough to keep myself and my crew out of any precarious situation.

A chance to further enlarge my ego came the morning the ship was scheduled to pull into Pearl Harbor. Our det's two aircraft were dispatched to Hickam AFB to pick up two dozen newspaper and television journalists, who were going to ride in on the ship. Well, if you've ever operated in this area, you know that Hickam AFB is an extension of Honolulu International airport, in busy, Class B airspace.

Thinking we should stay as far ahead of the game as possible, we contacted Honolulu Approach while we were still on deck and established radar contact immediately after takeoff. We launched at sunrise as a two-aircraft loose form, and my situational awareness promptly began to slide. I had flown form on only a handful of occasions, so I was tenacious about keeping position on the lead aircraft. In doing so, I didn't listen to the radios very closely, and, for the most part, didn't bother with anything else. I assumed that I'd simply follow lead in for the landing. My HAC felt he needed to keep a good eye



on how close I got to lead; he also neglected the rest of his duties.

These facts became dramatically apparent as we came into a hover to land at the approach end of a busy runway. The crew chief yelled, “Landing checks!” over ICS. Both of us up front scrambled to complete the landing checks and get out of the way of an incoming airliner. Once on deck and clear of the runway, we gave ourselves a sanity check, muttering, “How did I let that happen?”

Lesson learned, right? Not quite. With passengers aboard and headed back to the ship, we did it again. As I touched down on the pitching and rolling deck with a 30-knot headwind, I realized instantly that we had once again forgotten to complete the landing checks! We quickly set the parking brakes, which is the only thing that kept us from rolling into the aircraft parked on the spot in front of us.

A long debrief exposed several contributors to our dual loss of situational awareness. First, just because we had worked solely in a shipboard environment for five months didn’t mean we should do things any

differently going ashore. Prior to each shipboard landing, we ensure the landing checklist is completed. We should have done the same thing for the two legs of our flight that morning.

Second, our minds may have been more on what we were going to do once we heard liberty call later that afternoon than what was going on in the aircraft. It was Christmas time, and we had been at sea for 80 days, so the sooner this flight was over, the sooner the ship could begin its transit into port.

Third, and maybe most importantly, every crew member should have a keen awareness of what is going on. We need to be able to count on each other. If you haven’t heard the “landing checks completed” call, don’t hesitate to ask whether that task has been taken care of. We depend on our crew members to keep us out of dangerous situations, and we depend on the system of checks and balances to ensure common tasks are completed. 🇺🇸

Lt. Gray flies with HC-11.